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SUBJECT: STUDY FINDS XENOPHOBIC ATTACKS DRIVEN BY LOCAL  
POWER POLITICS

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. On March 11, a Wits University team unveiled the results of their research into the direct triggers of last year's xenophobic attacks in South African townships. Interviews and focus groups with over 300 residents of seven areas found the attacks were premeditated and organized by community leaders for their own political and economic gains. Police and other neighbors were largely passive during the attacks, either out of sympathy with the vigilantes, or out of fear of challenging them. Nine months later, the SAG has undertaken no substantive initiatives for reintegration of displaced foreigners, nor put in place any measures to prevent the recurrence of violence, nor put a single perpetrator on trial. In the current election season, there is little political will to champion migrants' rights. End Summary.

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CONTEXT: Broad Social Drivers of Xenophobia  
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¶2. Waves of xenophobic attacks against foreign migrants and ethnic minorities in May-June 2008, causing 62 deaths and the displacement of tens of thousands, shocked South Africa and belied its inclusive 'rainbow nation' ethos. Analysts generally attributed the attacks to broad economic and social ills -- such as poverty, extreme economic inequality, unemployment, and inadequate delivery of public services (e.g. housing, utilities, health care), creating competition for jobs and resources in squatter settlements. Foreigners were further blamed for the spread of crime and drugs. Apartheid's legacies of intolerance of alien groups, of distrust of police and formal authority structures, and of vigilante violence all were considered to have fed impulses to eject non-nationals by means of mob action.

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STUDY: Direct Local Triggers of Violence  
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¶3. On March 11, Wits University's Forced Migration Studies Programme (FMSP; <http://migration.org.za>) unveiled its research into the xenophobic attacks, the first to delve beneath macro social factors to the direct localized triggers of violence. The research was underwritten by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in turn funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). While agreeing with the broad-brush explanations, Wits' lead researcher Jean Pierre Misago said the study asked: if xenophobic sentiments and tensions were pervasive in South Africa, why did violence occur only in selected areas? To find the answer, researchers surveyed 305 persons (218 in one-on-one interviews, 87 in 10 focus groups) in

seven areas of Gauteng and Western Cape provinces -- five areas that experienced violence, and two areas that did not. Respondents spanned local residents, community leaders, police, NGOs, foreigners targeted in attacks, and even perpetrators of the violence.

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FINDING: Leaders Gained from Purges  
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¶4. Wits' MSRP team found the attacks were premeditated, not spontaneous, and organized by township leaders for their own political and economic gains. These leaders were both formal and informal authorities -- such as ward councilors, ANC party "comrades," members of "street committees," and neighborhood-watch Community Policing Forums (CPFs). Some were directly involved in organizing attacks, as a way of winning the support of residents and consolidating their control of contested neighborhoods. Such power, in turn, commonly conferred illicit economic rents and rackets, such as under-table fees for access to government housing, 'protection' fees, or other bribes. Some local authorities participated in illegal practices such as limiting the number of foreign-owned businesses. In other cases, authorities indirectly enabled violence by being detached and passive, failing to exert authority in areas of weak control. In such areas, vigilantism filled a leadership vacuum, usurping elected leaders.

¶5. Alexandra township, where attacks first erupted, provides a succinct case study of how local leaders were pivotal in opting for or against violence. Sector Two in 'Alex' was one of the areas worst affected by xenophobic attacks, whereas its Sector Five was spared altogether. The Wits team learned that Sector Two ringleaders in fact traveled to Sector Five to carry forward the attacks. Sector Five leaders, however, were wary that the Zulu visitors might turn on them as non-Zulu ethnic minorities after they had jointly purged the non-nationals. Instead of allying with Sector Two in violence, Sector Five instead negotiated to persuade foreigners to leave by peaceable means, thereby arresting the spread of violence.

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Police and Residents Stood By  
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¶6. Police and other residents were largely passive during the attacks. In some cases they were sympathetic with the vigilante mobs, in other cases too outnumbered, intimidated, or fearful to intervene. The identities of perpetrators -- both men and women -- were an open secret in the townships. Misago said his team was able to list them within a few days in each new area, and they unabashedly participated in interviews. Police were aware of xenophobic planning meetings in Alex hostels. Although police later claimed they were helpless to stop the violence, Misago said attackers claimed "they were with us all the way." Media images encouraged the spread of attacks, as police and local leaders were shown to be passive.

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SAG: Still No Real Action  
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¶7. Looking ahead, the Wits team notes that the SAG has undertaken no substantive initiatives for reintegration of displaced foreigners, nor put in place any measures to prevent the recurrence of violence. Indeed, the SAG's blanket encouragement to foreigners to return to their former homes could reignite violence where local leaders were complicit in attacks or where neighbors have already appropriated foreigners' property. Above all, Misago lamented that police and government officials publicly describe their responses as effective, in (eventually) quelling violence (albeit helped by President Mbeki's emergency deployment of the army after two weeks of turmoil).

Government arrested over 1,000 accused perpetrators and established specialized courts, but not a single case has gone to trial.

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COMMENT: No Political Will for Change  
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18. The Wits draft report offers a host of constructive recommendations to avert future xenophobia -- e.g. creation of a commission of inquiry to formulate interventions, effective migration management systems, positive leadership models, and early warning systems. IOM's regional representative Hans-Petter Boe noted that impunity for criminals must end, and children must receive civic education in tolerating differences. Despite much well-intentioned guidance from civil society and international community organizations, however, the SAG is unlikely to act. In townships where removal of foreigners was seen as a method of currying residents' favor, there is little political will in the current election season to champion migrants' rights.

LA LIME